

How One Student Put Off College For A Year And Changed His Life

By Cathy Tyson

A preponderance of high school graduates raised in Lamorinda head directly to college, and Lafayette resident Mike Meo was the only student in his entire graduating class at De La Salle High School to defer. Instead he chose to spend the better part of a school year in a tiny town called Magangue, Colombia. It all started when he took a trip to Tijuana, Mexico in February of his senior year, with his church youth group, volunteering at a school. "I realized this was my calling – teaching and learning."

"Some of my friends thought I was crazy, but in the end they were supportive. Around here, there is a machine that funnels kids directly to college."

The concept of deferment was virtually unheard of at his prestigious Christian Brothers college prep school. Early spring of his senior year, like most students,

Mike had already applied to a number of universities, and was waiting for, hopefully, acceptance letters. Unsure of where to start this process, Mike spoke with his counselor at De La Salle, who connected him with one of the head Brothers in San Francisco who it turns out is friends with the head Brother in Colombia.

Next he received acceptance letters from Hampshire College in Massachusetts and Lewis and Clark in Oregon. Unbeknownst to his parents, he spoke with the administration at Hampshire, his first choice, to inquire about deferment. No problem, 5% - 10% of the students at this small liberal arts college defer.

The next hurdle was broaching the subject with Mom and Dad. "At first I just spoke about the concept of deferment and its many benefits just to introduce them to the



Mike Meo teaching a class

idea." In the end, they were concerned for his safety, but supportive.

Long story short, instead of flying east to Hampshire College, on Sept. 7th of 2006, Mike flew south to Bogotá, Columbia. It was clearly a leap of faith, as prior to his departure he had no idea about Columbia in general, Magangue in particular, calling home, a hospital in case he was injured, drinking water etc.

He was able to stay at the De La Salle University in Bogotá for a week to get acclimated and visit the surrounding villages.

Mike ended up teaching 15 classes at 4 different schools, developed his own curriculum, and mastered the Spanish language. He was a bit of a celebrity in town due to his outsider status and his pronunciation skills.

"These kids are the most ambitious students; half of them are hungry, it's 110 degrees out, they have nothing but old desks and a beat up chalkboard, and they would

stay in class for an hour after the final bell rang."

His blog, www.mikecolombia.blogspot.com details his entire journey. Early in his trip, on September 13, he writes, "The transition from dependent to independent began on Sunday, when I arrived. I still know very little, I still can't fully understand the language. Every little thing is a huge achievement for me. Every phrase I learn is that much more independence... In one week, I have gained a new appreciation for so many things."

By December, Mike was enjoying life in Colombia. "Everything is so beautiful here because everything is so different. It's hard to forget here, that change, that freshness of life. I am in this weird stage right now, where I feel so comfortable here, so at home in this town. Where I feel different but not like a foreigner... Everything waits for me to find it and capture it."

Fast-forward to late August 2007, Mike leaves for Hampshire College a changed man. "There are about a billion ways that this experience has affected me.

I have grown in ways I couldn't have imagined – I have a new perspective, new eyes, new dreams, and a new purpose in life and motivation."

Mike wants to invite students and parents considering a gap year to contact him via e-mail at kiiyaker@sbcglobal.net



Meo and friends on the playground

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